

Department of Health Washington Medical Commission

Notice of Adoption – Interpretive Statement

Title: Opioid Prescribing and Monitoring for Patients | INS2025-03

Issuing Entity: Washington Medical Commission

Subject Matter: Ensuring patients understand opioid prescribing rules and providing guidance to support informed discussions with their healthcare practitioners.

Effective Date: May 9, 2025

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OFFICE OF THE CODE REVISER
STATE OF WASHINGTON
FILED

DATE: May 20, 2025

TIME: 3:02 PM

WSR 25-11-079

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Interpretive Statement

Title:	Opioid Prescribing & Monitoring for Patients
Interpretive Statement Number:	INS2025-03
References:	RCW 18.71.800 ; RCW 18.71A.800 ; WAC 246-919-850 through WAC 246-919-985 ; WAC 246-918-800 through WAC 246-918-935
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Effective Date:	May 9, 2025
Supersedes:	INS2019-02, INS2023-04
Approved By:	Karen Domino, MD, Chair (signature on file)

The Washington Medical Commission (Commission) interprets physician rules [WAC 246-919-850](#) to [246-919-985](#) and corresponding physician assistant rules [WAC 246-918-800](#) to [WAC 246-918-935](#) as encouraging practitioners to not exclude, undertreat, or dismiss a patient from a practice solely because the patient has used or is currently using opioids in the course of normal medical care. Refusing to treat or discontinuing treatment of patients solely due to current or past opioid use is inappropriate and may violate the standard of care.

Description of the Issue

The Commission is aware that some practitioners are refusing to see or continue to treat patients who have taken or are currently using opioids. To help underscore and clarify the need for patient access and the rights of patients for treatment, the Commission issues this interpretive statement for patient and practitioner use.

Interpretive Statement

The Intent and Scope section of both the physician opioid prescribing rule, WAC 246-919-850, and the physician assistant opioid prescribing rule, WAC 246-918-800, states that appropriate pain management is the responsibility of the treating practitioner and that the inappropriate treatment of pain, including lack of treatment, is a departure from the standard of care. The Commission encourages practitioners, especially those in primary care, to view pain management as a part of standard medical practice for all patients and to become knowledgeable about assessing pain and effective treatments.

The Commission interprets physician rules [WAC 246-919-850](#) to [246-919-985](#) and corresponding physician assistant rules [WAC 246-918-800](#) to [WAC 246-918-935](#) as encouraging practitioners to not exclude, undertreat, or dismiss a patient from a practice solely because the patient has used or is currently using opioids in the course of normal medical care. While in most circumstances a practitioner is not legally required to treat a particular patient, the refusal to see or continue to treat a patient merely because the patient has taken or is currently using opioids is contrary to the clear intent of the Commission's rules governing opioid prescribing. Ending opioid therapy or initiating a forced tapering of opioids to a particular morphine equivalent dose (MED) level for reasons outside of abuse or clinical efficacy or improvement in quality of life or function would violate the intent of the rules.

Background

In 2011, the Commission established rules for managing chronic, noncancer pain to alleviate practitioner uncertainty, encourage better pain management, and assist practitioners in providing appropriate medical care for patients. Since 2011, the Legislature and Commission have made changes on the management of chronic pain to improve patient care and safety.

In 2018, at the direction of the Legislature, the Commission created new rules regarding opioid prescribing for acute nonoperative, acute perioperative, and subacute pain, including the use of multimodal pharmacologic and nonpharmacological therapies as possible alternatives to opioids.¹ The Commission made minor modifications to the existing rules for managing chronic pain as well.

In 2020, at the direction of the Legislature, the Commission revised its rules to require a practitioner to inform a patient that the patient has the right to refuse an opioid prescription for any reason.²

Additionally, in 2022, the Commission amended the rules to state the rules do not apply to the treatment of patients in nursing homes, long-term acute care facilities, residential treatment facilities, and residential habilitation centers.³

Analysis

The opioid prescribing rules for physicians ([WAC 246-919-850](#)) and physician assistants ([WAC 246-918-800](#)) describe the Commission's intent and scope of the rules as follows:

"The [commission] recognizes that principles of quality medical practice dictate that the people of the state of Washington have access to appropriate and effective pain relief. The appropriate application of up-to-date knowledge and treatment modalities can serve to improve the quality of life for those patients who suffer from pain as well as reduce the morbidity, mortality, and costs associated with untreated or inappropriately treated pain. For the purposes of these rules, the inappropriate treatment of pain includes nontreatment, undertreatment, overtreatment, and the continued use of ineffective treatments.

The diagnosis and treatment of pain is integral to the practice of medicine. The commission encourages [practitioners] to view pain management as a part of quality medical practice

¹ Engrossed Substitute House Bill 1427.

² RCW 18.71.810; WAC 246-919-865(1)(e); WAC 246-918-815(1)(d).

³ WAC 246-919-851(5); WAC 246-918-801(5)

for all patients with pain, including acute, perioperative, subacute, and chronic pain. All [practitioners] should become knowledgeable about assessing patients' pain and effective methods of pain treatment, as well as become knowledgeable about the statutory requirements for prescribing opioids, including co-occurring prescriptions. Accordingly, these rules clarify the commission's position on pain control, particularly as related to the use of controlled substances, to alleviate [practitioner] uncertainty and to encourage better pain management.

Inappropriate pain treatment may result from a [practitioner's] lack of knowledge about pain management. Fears of investigation or sanction by federal, state, or local agencies may also result in inappropriate treatment of pain. Appropriate pain management is the treating [practitioner's] responsibility. As such, the commission will consider the inappropriate treatment of pain to be a departure from standards of practice and will investigate such allegations, recognizing that some types of pain cannot be completely relieved, and taking into account whether the treatment is appropriate for the diagnosis. The commission recognizes that controlled substances including opioids may be essential in the treatment of acute, subacute, perioperative, or chronic pain due to disease, illness, trauma or surgery. The commission will refer to current clinical practice guidelines and expert review in approaching cases involving management of pain.

The medical management of pain should consider current clinical knowledge, scientific research, and the use of pharmacologic and nonpharmacologic modalities according to the judgment of the [practitioner]. Pain should be assessed and treated promptly, and the quantity and frequency of doses should be adjusted according to the intensity, duration, impact of the pain, and treatment outcomes. [Practitioners] should recognize that tolerance and physical dependence are normal consequences of sustained use of opioids and are not the same as opioid use disorder.

The commission is obligated under the laws of the state of Washington to protect the public health and safety. The commission recognizes that the use of opioids for other than legitimate medical purposes poses a threat to the individual and society. The inappropriate prescribing of controlled substances, including opioids, may lead to drug diversion and abuse by individuals who seek them for other than legitimate medical use. Accordingly, the commission expects that [practitioners] incorporate safeguards into their practices to minimize the potential for the abuse and diversion of controlled substances.

[Practitioners] should not fear disciplinary action from the commission for ordering, prescribing, dispensing or administering controlled substances, including opioids, for a legitimate medical purpose and in the course of professional practice. The commission will consider prescribing, ordering, dispensing or administering controlled substances for pain to be for a legitimate medical purpose if based on sound clinical judgment. All such prescribing must be based on clear documentation of unrelieved pain. To be within the usual course of professional practice, a [practitioner]-patient relationship must exist and the prescribing should be based on a diagnosis and documentation of unrelieved pain. Compliance with applicable state or federal law is required.

The commission will judge the validity of the [practitioner] treatment of the patient based on available documentation, rather than solely on the quantity and duration of medication

administration. The goal is to control the patient's pain while effectively addressing other aspects of the patient's functioning, including physical, psychological, social, and work-related factors.

These rules are designed to assist [practitioners] in providing appropriate medical care for patients. The practice of medicine involves not only the science, but also the art of dealing with the prevention, diagnosis, alleviation, and treatment of disease. The variety and complexity of human conditions make it impossible to always reach the most appropriate diagnosis or to predict with certainty a particular response to treatment.

Therefore, it should be recognized that adherence to these rules will not guarantee an accurate diagnosis or a successful outcome. The sole purpose of these rules is to assist [practitioners] in following a reasonable course of action based on current knowledge, available resources, and the needs of the patient to deliver effective and safe medical care.

For more specific best practices, the [practitioner] may refer to clinical practice guidelines including, but not limited to, those produced by the agency medical directors' group, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or the Bree Collaborative.”

To further clarify the established intent and scope, the Commission directs practitioners to avoid rigid MED requirements that may lead to the undertreatment of pain or the unnecessary tapering of patients who are stable in both pain levels and function. The Commission will evaluate a practitioner's treatment based on available documentation rather than solely on the quantity, duration, or morphine equivalent dose (MED) of prescribed medication. The goal is to manage the patient's pain while also addressing their overall well-being, including physical, psychological, social, and work-related factors.

Examples

Here are real-life examples showing how the Commission's opioid prescribing rules apply in practice, including treating long-time patients with new pain conditions, accepting new patients already on opioids, and deciding when tapering is appropriate. These examples illustrate what good care looks like and what may fall below the standard of care.

Existing Patient

A patient with a longstanding history in a medical practice develops an injury or condition that becomes a pain condition requiring chronic opioid therapy. Generally, a practitioner who refuses to treat the condition properly, including the appropriate utilization of opioids when opioids are clearly indicated, would be practicing below the standard of care. Similarly, a practitioner who refers the patient to a pain management specialist as defined by Commission rule but refuses to continue or support the pain management treatment plan designed by the specialist while responding to all other aspects of patient care, would generally be practicing below the standard of care. Finally, electing to terminate the patient from the practice because their regular care involves pain management or opioid therapy would be generally be practicing below the standard of care.

New Patient

The Commission's opioid prescribing rules provide incentives for practitioners to take new patients into their practice who are on existing opioid therapy regimens.

[WAC 246-919-955](#) and [246-918-905](#), and the corresponding physician assistant rules, provide specific guidance to the practitioner to do the following with new patients on high dose opioids:

- Maintain the patient's current opioid doses until an appropriate assessment suggests that a change is indicated (see second bullet point).
- Evaluate over time if any tapering can or should be done.
- Be aware that new patients on high dose opioids are exempt from mandatory pain specialist consultation requirements for the first three months of newly established care if:
 - The patient was previously being treated for the same condition(s);
 - The presenting dose is stable and nonescalating;
 - There is a history of compliance with written agreements and treatment plans; and
 - There is documented function improvements or stability at the presenting dose.

[Tapering](#)

A patient on opioid therapy, chronic or otherwise, is on a stable nonescalating dose. A practitioner has observed the patient's function and quality of life to be positive. However, citing reasons related to state or federal law or desire to have the patient below a certain MED per day, the practitioner initiates a tapering schedule without receiving the patient's consent or considering the patient's function or quality of life. This would be a clear violation of the Commission opioid prescribing rules.

[WAC 246-919-950](#) clearly explains that tapering would be expected for chronic pain patients when one or more of the following occurs:

- The patient requests tapering;
- The patient experiences an improvement in function or pain;
- The patient is noncompliant with the written agreement;
- Other treatment modalities are indicated;
- There is evidence of misuse, abuse, substance use disorder, or diversion;
- The patient experiences a severe adverse event or overdose;
- There is an unauthorized escalation of doses; or
- The patient is receiving an authorized escalation of dose with no improvement in pain or function.

Additionally, this WAC section was updated in 2025 to include the statement: "Not all chronic pain patients will need their opioid prescriptions tapered." This revision was made in response to complaints received since the 2018 opioid rule updates, highlighting cases where chronic pain patients were tapered too quickly or had their opioid therapy discontinued entirely. The Department of Health released a statement on [September 20, 2019](#) that spoke to this issue: "Neither the Washington State opioid prescribing rules nor the CDC opioid prescribing guideline support rapidly tapering or discontinuing opioids for patients on existing opioid doses exceeding 90 mg MME per day under most circumstances. Abruptly tapering or discontinuing opioids in a patient who is physically dependent may cause serious patient harms including severe withdrawal symptoms, uncontrolled pain, psychological distress, and in rare instances, suicide."

A practitioner treating a patient on a stable nonescalating dose with positive impact on function would not be required to seek additional consultation with a pain specialist. Additionally, there is no upper MED limit in Washington State or federal law. The Commission's opioid prescribing rules represent the only legal requirement for licensed allopathic physicians and physician assistants in Washington state and set a 120 mg MED consultation threshold for practitioners who are not considered pain management specialists under the rule. The rules do not prohibit practitioners from referring a patient to a pain specialist before patients reach the "consultation threshold," nor do they prevent a practitioner from self-imposing a smaller MED limit for their patients.

The Commission directs the practitioner to document the outcomes, reasoning, and discussions with the patient as outlined in the rules and described in this interpretive statement in the patient's medical record as part of the normal course of medical practice.

In summary, the Commission issues this interpretive statement to clarify that refusing to treat or discontinuing treatment of patients solely due to current or past opioid use is inappropriate and may violate the standard of care. Pain management is a core responsibility of medical practitioners, and the Commission's opioid prescribing rules are designed to ensure patients have access to safe, effective treatment. Practitioners are encouraged to evaluate and manage pain based on individual needs, clinical judgment, and documented outcomes without rigid dose limits or unnecessary tapering. New patients on stable opioid regimens should be assessed and maintained appropriately, and decisions regarding tapering must consider patient function, quality of life, and consent. The Commission emphasizes documentation, adherence to clinical guidelines, and a commitment to compassionate, individualized care.